

From: Neilesh Bose [<mailto:nbose@uvic.ca>]
Sent: Monday, May 16, 2016 9:59 PM
To: HSSframework
Cc: Kamala Visweswaran
Subject: Letter in support of the South Asia Faculty Group

State Board of Education
California Department of Education
1430 N Street, Room 1101
Sacramento, California 95814

May 17, 2016

Dear Members of Instructional Quality Commission and the California Board of Education,

On behalf of the Society for Advancing the History of South Asia (SAHSA), we write to express our support for the recommendations of the South Asia Faculty Group (SAFG) regarding proposed changes to the curriculum for the 6th and 7th grade History-Social Science Framework. As an affiliate organization of the American Historical Association, comprised of professors, graduate students, and scholars of all ranks and disciplines working in South Asian history in the U.S.A., we share concerns with the SAFG that particular Hindu American organizations are promoting Hindu nationalist and their majoritarian religious biases in their suggested revisions to textbooks, under the guise of protecting Hinduism and protecting Hindu American children. As a group of scholars whose specializations in South Asian history include the history of caste, religion, migration, nationalism, empire, gender, art, architecture, and many other topics, from the ancient to contemporary periods, we support the application of the most rigorous standards possible for the purposes of revising state textbooks to reflect best practices current in scholarship when presenting material from South Asian history. As measured by such standards, we believe there is ample reason to be concerned about the accuracy and neutrality of the curricular changes being promoted by organized by the Vedic Foundation, the American Hindu Education Foundation, the Uberoi Foundation, and the Hindu American Foundation.

Regarding the usage of “India” and “South Asia,” SAHSA supports the mission of the SAFG to encourage a broader multiplicity of terms to refer to the complex landscapes they denote for different historical periods. Toward this end, we support the use of terms ranging from “ancient India” to “the Indian subcontinent” to “South Asia” as appropriate depending on context and time period. SAHSA further supports the SAFG mission of including mention of caste, untouchability, and hierarchy as concepts for understanding the history of society and culture in ancient India, and the history of Hinduism itself. Indeed, it is only through examining the importance of the realities to which these concepts refer that historians are able to capture other kinds of social and political changes manifested through diverse forms of opposition to caste and other related forms of social stratification which have shaped key aspects of the history of South Asia.

We respect the integrity and sincerity of the work of our colleagues in the SAFG and we are deeply troubled by reports of organized campaigns of harassment and intimidation against its members and consultants. Concurring with the statements in SAFG’s letter of March 23, 2016, we too are motivated by no animus against Hindu communities nor any wish to needlessly denigrate the sentiments of a religious community that is vital to the United States’ pluralistic society. However, accuracy demands

that we clarify that those who have critiqued SAFG and intimated that its supporters wish to eradicate mentions of India in the curriculum are simply mistaken (if not malicious) in their allegations. Rather, like the SAFG, our stance is rooted in the ideal of promoting open and transparent discussion of history by and with the scholarly community and to analyze the complex realities of Hinduism and the Indian nation-state (including, as the SAFG recommends, for units beyond 6th and 7th grade). Also, we support expanding students' vision of Hinduism as well as religion in ancient India beyond only ancient scriptural texts of the Vedas. This expansion grounds the public's understanding of religion within history, rather than simply in the particularist positions driven by present-day agendas. Finally, we emphasize that our stance about the curriculum is intended to promote pedagogical excellence not only for Indian-American children but for all students who may read and learn from the state's textbooks. In this respect, these controversies are comparable to efforts aimed at a nuanced portrayal of the history of the United States, particularly with respect to subordinated groups and histories of conquest embedded within U.S. historical narratives. Sanitizing aspects of history in a way that distorts or minimizes the history of caste-based violence, that reduces or distorts the opposition to caste in the history of other South Asian religious traditions such as Buddhism, Jainism, or Sikhism, or that mandates a single (and possibly anachronistic) term "India" as if it uniformly and accurately captures the reality of all historical time periods within the region we now know as South Asia will ultimately do a great disservice to all students of history in the 21st century American classroom.

As the SAFG letter of March 23, 2016 suggests, we recognize the existence of scholarly debate as well as divergence between scholarly and popular frames of references for narrating history. As public officials charged with keeping watch over the integrity of our children's education, we urge you to err on the side of multi-disciplinary scholarly opinion in general and with the scholarly consensus among those with expertise in the discipline of South Asian history in particular.

Sincerely,

Neilesh Bose, President
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